The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

COLONEL FRANK ATHANASON

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

Initial interview date: June 10, 2005

Q: Today is the tenth of June, 2005 this is an interview with Colonel Frank Athanason. This is being done at the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training and I am Charles Stuart Kennedy. We go back to the 1970s when we were both in Athens. Lets get a little feel for who you are, when were you born, Frank?

ATHANASON: August 1, 1926

Q: Where?

ATHANASON: Augusta, Georgia

Q: Where did your family come from?

ATHANASON: My mother and father came from the island of Kalymnos, Greece which is in Dodecanese. They left Kalymnos when it was still under Turkish domination. I think about 1907, my father came over to the United States and my mother followed about three years later. There were nine children, three were born in Kalymnos and came over with my mother and the other six were born here in the U.S.

Q: You pointed out at one time when we were talking that actually your family was never under Greek rule.

ATHANASON: That's right.

Q: They didn't come to Greece until 1945.

ATHANASON: 1947 I think.

Q: What was your father doing then in Georgia?

ATHANASON: Well in Greece the family had a tannery. They used to tan hides and he would travel to Russia and sell the hides. He knew how to make shoes. When he came to the United States, he was making shoes in Georgia. I was born there. A fire destroyed his shop when I was six months old and rather than rebuild the shop, we moved to Tarpon Springs, Florida. We had another relative there. And he had another shoe shop in Tarpon Springs.

Q: When you were a kid growing up, was your father a shoemaker?

ATHANASON: Yes.

Q: What was Tarpon Springs like?

ATHANASON: Tarpon Springs had a population of about 4,500, if I recall, I might not be exact on this. I would say 70 to 75percent were Greek and about 80 percent of that 75 percent came from Kalymnos, Simi and Hockey because of the sponge industry.

Q: Simi and Hockey were also part of the islands?

ATHANASON: Yes. They were all involved in sponging in the Mediterranean so when they brought people over to sponge in the U.S., they went to those islands and brought people over.

Q: It's hard to remember, but before plastics came in, everyone had sponges for the bath and washing dishes too. The sponge industry was a major industry.

ATHANASON: When I was a kid living in Tarpon Springs, there were over 100boats that went sponging and each boat had a crew of eight to nine people and I would say that 60 percent of that fleet had divers that actually went down. The other 40 percent used the long poles with hooks and they would go in shallower water and get a cheaper grade sponge.

Q: Did you ever try your hand at sponging?

ATHANASON: No, but I have classmates who are the foremost experts on sponges in the state of Florida. When you see somebody now talking about sponges, in Florida, it's a classmate of mine, George Billiris.

Q: Did the sponging industry die completely or is it still going?

ATHANASON: No, the sponge industry today is not like it used to be because there are only maybe a dozen boats that go out now, but in my youth there were over a hundred boats. The sponge is plentiful in Florida waters and when those boats come in there are buyers down there, eager to buy the sponge. There's a great demand for sponges worldwide like in Italy, Germany and England. This friend, George Billiris, still maintains packing houses, ships, packets, packages, sponges, just like they did seventy-five years ago.

Q: How about school? How long did you live in Tarpon Springs?

ATHANASON: I was number nine of the nine children so my father was about 65 years old when he died and I was only ten. We left Florida after my father died. We went to live with my brother in South Carolina when I was about 13 so I think I was in the fifth grade.

Q: Do you remember the depression?

ATHANASON: Yes. In Tarpon Springs, I can remember the depression. Most of the people who had work done in my father's shop didn't have the money to pay him, but he would do the work for them any way.

Q: Where did you go to elementary school?

ATHANASON: In Tarpon Springs I went through the fifth grade, elementary. Of course, every day after school I had to go to Greek school too which I hated like all kids did, because it kind of tied us down.

Q: How orthodox Greek was your family?

ATHANASON: Well, my mother and father of course spoke Greek in the house all the time. Neither one of them spoke English well. My mother brought us up in the church. My father was religious, but he didn't go to church. He would normally stay home on Sunday and cook and we would all come home and have a big dinner.

Q: You moved to South Carolina?

ATHANASON: Greenville, South Carolina.

Q: What year?

ATHANASON: 1936 or 1937. I went to a middle school and then junior high and then high school. South Carolina in those years had eleven grades not twelve.

Q: Maryland did that at one time. During the depression, it was a way of saving money.

ATHANASON: When I went from the tenth to eleventh grade we moved to Savannah, Georgia and lived with a sister because her husband was a Greek teacher and my mother was a teacher. So they both had jobs teaching at the Savannah Greek community. So, I went there and they put me in the twelfth grade. As a result of that, I graduated when I was 16 years old.

Q: How did you find school? What subjects did you like, what didn't you like?

ATHANASON: Well, I was never a very studious person, but I was sort of a good kid. I was never in trouble. I was either at home or working. I liked chemistry, I loved ROTC (Reserved Officers' Training Corps), and in Savannah they had junior ROTC in high school. I liked shop. I loved drafting; I thought I might want to be an architect. I was weak in English. I loved history. I liked everything. I was never good in English though.

Q: What about after school jobs?

ATHANASON: In high school I worked at a wholesale tobacco company. They sold everything from wholesale beer to cigarettes to candies to all the restaurants in town and grocery stores. It was run by a very wealthy Greek who took a liking to me. Even though I was only fifteen years old at the time, I was overseeing part of the operation.

Q: I take it that in South Carolina in those days there was strict segregation.

ATHANASON: Very much so.

Q: How about at the work place?

ATHANASON: At Tarpon Springs, the Greeks employed a lot of the blacks on the boats. Not to go out as a crew member, but when a boat would come in to do the cleaning and the preparations of sponge. Many of those blacks spoke Greek, not well, but they had to speak it because none of the Greeks spoke English.

I didn't notice any problem there. We had only one policeman in the whole town. I know there was a section of the town that was blacks. We didn't go there. We didn't have any trouble with them. They didn't go to school with us. I really didn't realize there was any problem there.

In South Carolina it was more noticeable. There were black areas that you didn't go to. I, always, as a young man could not understand that. Since I loved history, I knew about our constitution and our Bill of Rights. I would always question, how can this be since everybody is supposed to be created equal and be treated equally? I carried this philosophy in to the army when I served with all black troops.

Q: Where did you go to college?

ATHANASON: In high school I had thoughts of being an architect or a dentist. There's quite a difference. I even got a weekend job with a dentist. When he would open his office on Saturday, I would go help there. So when I graduated, I left Savannah to go to North Georgia College to take pre-dental. I stopped off in Atlanta to visit my brother who was a lieutenant colonel at the time in the army. He was born in Greece. He was the oldest. He was an engineer, graduated from Georgia Tech. He said, "No, you're going to go to Georgia Tech." And that's where he put me. I had no choice. I was not prepared for it. I was very weak compared to the northern kids on mathematics. And Georgia Tech, it was like throwing you to the wolves if you were weak in math. Anyway, I struggled there for about a year and a half. I made decent grades in chemistry, social sciences, and drawing. The only subject I ever failed was mathematics and I failed it there. I made extremely high grades in ROTC.

Q: What happened?

ATHANASON: After a year and a half I had an emergency hernia operation. In those days they kept you in the hospital for two to three weeks. I wasn't a great student any way so I fell behind. Rather than go back and try to catch up, (the semester system and the quarter system didn't jive right) and the Citadel where my mother was teaching in Charleston, South Carolina (they moved from Savannah to Charleston). I went home to visit her and decided to go in to the Citadel. I knew I would eventually get drafted and I loved ROTC, I loved the military. So I finished my sophomore year at the Citadel before I was drafted into the army.

Q: How did you find the Citadel?

ATHANASON: It was much easier than Georgia Tech. The standards are not as high for drawing and mathematics. I liked the military life.

Q: You were at the Citadel what years?

ATHANASON: 1943 and 1944

Q: So obviously, World War II was raging...

ATHANASON: In fact, while I was there, we received word that my brother (not the oldest brother, but another brother) was killed in action in Germany in September of 1944. That was another reason I wanted to be at the Citadel, I was near my mother and I knew I would eventually get drafted.

Q: You were drafted when?

ATHANASON: February of 1945 and I was sent to the induction station at Fort McPherson, Georgia. My brother was still stationed in Atlanta at the time. He was in charge of training in the forth service command which included the southeast states. He and I were never very close. He was more like a father than a brother to me; he was extremely strict. He still had a Greek mentality. He didn't bother to try to find out where I was going or what I was going to do or try to help me in any way. We were processed and sent to Camp Blanding, Florida to take infantry basic training.

At the time I was eighteen and a half years old and I don't think I weighed more than 105 to 110 pounds. But because I went to Citadel and because I had the ROTC background, they made me an acting corporal right away so I didn't have to do the menial tasks of the other privates: cleaning latrines, KP (Kitchen Patrol), and all of that. It helped that the company commander was a Citadel graduate. He was a very fine gentleman and he sort of watched over me. I began to excel over the other members of the company on being the best shot on the rifle, the BAR (_____ automatic rifle), the mortar.

That gave me other privileges. Then World War II in Europe ended while I was taking basic training. My brother did try to assist me in a way. He arranged for me to take a test to go into the ASTP (Army Specialist Training Program). They sent you back to college as an enlisted man. I was not interested in that. I went to take the test and I think I didn't complete it or didn't try to complete it, maybe to spite him. He got upset with me. I put in for OCS (Officer Candidate School) in lieu of that and he said I didn't have a ghost of a chance of making that, but I did. There were only a few of us selected because they weren't looking for too many officers at the time. There was no great demand. I was called in for my final interview and asked what branch of service I preferred. They had three choices. I listed engineers, first choice, armor, second choice, and infantry, third choice. The interviewer remarked since your initials are FA, we're going to send you to field artillery. So off to Fort Sill I went.

Q: What were they doing between the end of WWII as you went to Fort Sill and the start of the Korean War?

ATHANASON: I went to Fort Sill. They had a class of 50 students. Each class had 50 students. We had about three weeks to go to graduation and there were six of us left out of the 50. They were being extra hard on us. They didn't really want you at the time. So, they put us back to the next class because it didn't pay to have a class of six people. So, I graduated two weeks late, December 7, 1945, I was 19 years old at the time.

I was sent to Fort Bragg, North Carolina for about a month and then I was sent to Germany. I served a year in Germany, during the occupation. It was interesting that, I was just a kid really. They gave me 200 black soldiers in Camp Kilmer, New Jersey to take to Germany. That was my first command.

Q: In artillery?

ATHANASON: No, they were just replacements going to Germany. I had not seen an artillery piece yet. I got to Germany and went to a replacement depot and the company commander that was processing took a liking to me. He asked me if I'd like to stay there and work for him. I didn't know the difference so I stayed there for a year and worked for him in Erlanger, Germany, which was very close to Nuremburg (just 12 miles). I worked processing troops through. I ran into racial discrimination there in that when we'd get a trainload of blacks in, they were given different areas to sleep than the whites. I never could understand that.

From there, I came back to the United States. I took a test to become regular army; I was not accepted. I was sent to Fort Benning, Georgia for the first time to an artillery unit. It was a godsend in a way because this battalion fired for the school. So, we fired hundreds of rounds every day, five days a week. I got a lot of good experience there. In fact, once I made first lieutenant...I jumped track there. Before I went to Fort Benning (after I took the test and didn't pass it- or wasn't accepted I don't know what kind of grade I managed, but I wasn't accepted), I was sent to Fort Jackson, South Carolina to an all black unit. I got along fine with them, but the city of Columbia was not a place to have a black unit. They decided to move the unit to Fort Dicks, New Jersey. I went along with them.

I had about 200 on a train taking them from Fort Jackson, South Carolina to New Jersey. They put us on a side track over night near Augusta, Georgia, near where I was born. I had one senior NCO (non-commissioned officer) and I put him in charge of getting the troops fed in the morning. We had been given tickets worth a dollar and a quarter each (coupons). He came to report to me that all the troops had been fed the next morning. I asked him what they ate and he said, "A donut and a cup of coffee. They ate it outside of the train; they didn't let them in the diner." That upset me and I went in the diner and ordered a dollar and a quarter's worth of food (and you had to order extra to spend a dollar and a quarter in those days). I had the sergeant line up the troops outside and on my orders we were going to smash the windows of the train and start a race riot. When I called the head conductor I said, "We want 200 more just like this or we plan to tear this train apart." He agreed to feed the troops and allow them to come inside. So, that averted a problem.

This goes back to my thinking, I could never understand why they were treated that way. We got to Fort Dicks, New Jersey. I got along very fine with them. There was no animosity in those days. The blacks were happy. That's when I got my orders. A new program came out that if you wanted to go regular army again, there was a new program where they would send you to a unit of your branch and serve under four commanders in one year. Depending on the reports from those four commanders, you were either accepted or not accepted. That's when they sent me to Fort Benning. I served there for about a year and a half. I made regular army based on my performance there. In fact at the end of my period there, they activated a new battalion. I was made a battery commander. For a first lieutenant, that was a feather in my cap. It was headquarters battery battalion. In those days, the headquarters battery commander wore two hats: he was the battalion's communications officer and the battery commander. I was very successful with that battery for three or four months and then I got orders saying that now that I was regular army, I would be given an opportunity to get in on the ground floor and go to the air defense artillery. At that point, they had integrated the two artilleries in to one: air defense and field artillery.

Q: Air defense was anti-aircraft?

ATHANASON: Yes, anti-aircraft. I was sent to Fort Bliss, Texas to get air defense training. As soon as I arrived there, they looked at my record that I'd been to Georgia Tech for a little while and the Citadel. I was called in and they said, 'we're not going to put you in a unit, we're going to make you an instructor.' They put me in the electronics department teaching trigonometry, algebra, and basic electricity. Again, it was the first time I really started to understand algebra (because I had to).

Q: You were reading one chapter ahead of the class?

ATHANASON: Yes, but it made more sense to me. In the mean time, with the artillery it made more sense to me too. I could see some practical application. And, I was more mature. All of those factors together...I enjoyed teaching and I enjoyed teaching always in the army. I was always very good at it. I was always rated as the best instructor wherever I went because I like to work with people.

Then the Korean War broke out while I was there. I figured, being regular army and I had missed WWII, that if I was going to stay in the army, I should go to Korea. So, I volunteered. It didn't take very long for them to accept my offer because they were looking for people. I was sent to Korea.

Q: Where did you serve in Korea?

ATHANASON: I arrived there in October of 1950 and landed at Inchon, not as a combat landing, it was just a port then. They put us on trucks and took me all the way up to the Yallo River. I was assigned to the 555 field artillery battalion, which came from Hawaii, and it was part of a separate regiment. That separate regiment was in the twenty-fourth infantry division.

Q: The Indian Head division?

ATHANASON: No, the Taro Leaf. Indian Head was Second Division. They had had one regiment sort of decimated during the Pusan Perimeter so rather than rebuild that regiment, they took this separate regiment and made it the third regiment of the division, the fifth RCT. I reported in, I had a Colonel named Stu, Stuart. He looked to me like an old fella, but he must have been 42 years old. He was heavyset. He was a former chemistry teacher who got in to the regular army. His whole goal in life was to make sure that West Pointers got anything they needed and wanted. If there was anything left over, he'd give it to the regular officers and, the hell with the reserve officer. He had them in that category. If you were a reserve officer under him, you would never have a chance to command regardless of how senior you were.

He called me in. At that time I had almost three years in grade as a first lieutenant. At that time, it took six to ten years to make captain. He said, "We're not going to give you an assignment now because the war looks like it's going to be over in two or three weeks. We're going back to Hawaii and there will be a lot of changes. Let me wait and see who's going where and then I'll decide where to put you." About a week later the Chinese changed his plans. He called me in and made me communication officer. In the mean time, the headquarters battery commander and the communication officer were separated. They were two different jobs. Both required a captain. There was a rule that they were going under at the time that if you held a job of a higher rank for thirty days in combat that you would be promoted to that rank. My colonel put a little spin on that, he said it had to be a command job. Communications officer was a staff job so that didn't apply to me. Being that I was regular army, the first that he could put me in a command job, he would do so.

So we fell back from that point on all the way back south of Seoul. That was a very bad period, as you well know...the weather. We had horrendous weather, the cold. We didn't get proper winter clothing until well after Christmas. We had to improvise the best we could with what we had. We were even short of anti-freeze to the point where we had to run the engines at night or drain the engines at night and keep the water warm somewhere and put it back in the morning. The morale was very low. We just kept falling back until we got to Sou An and we stopped at that point. There was a change of command, that's when Ridgway came in. He turned things around with attitude. Morale went up. We started getting better clothing, started getting tentage; we were mostly living in Korean houses. We started moving back up toward the 38th parallel.

My main job was communication officer. Then some of the West Pointers who had been commanding batteries had enough points to go home. As soon as there were three vacancies (all three battery commanders left at the same time, all three West Pointers). He replaced those three with one West Pointer and two regular officers, myself being one of the two.

Thirty days later we were able to get promoted to captain. But in my case, my orders were lost somewhere along the line. The other two were promoted and I was not. In fact, the division commander came down one day, put his arm around me and said, "Don't worry," he'd find out what was going on and that it took him eleven years to make captain, no I think he said sixteen years...He said, "We'll take care of you." When they did find the orders, they backdated my promotion to equal the other two.

Then I was a battery commander up until about three months before I was ready to go home. The major that was the operations officer left and the colonel moved me up to take his job. By that time, he had changed the rules again that if I had kept that job for sixty days, I would have been a major. I was not even twenty-four years old yet. But after holding the job for about thirty days, a new major came in and I became his assistant. So that's the main jobs I had: operations officer, battery commander, and communications officer.

Q: What was the feeling about the Korean War at the time? Was there a feeling of what the hell are we doing here?

ATHANASON: No. Nobody talked about that. You mean the political side of it? No. Nobody thought about that.

Q: How about, was there anything about MacArthur?

ATHANASON: No. At my level, we were trying to keep warm, trying to keep your troops fed, trying to keep from getting shot. No. We were waiting to get the hell out of there. Every six months, we sent people to Japan for a week. There were no political discussions. We did get the first black soldier in my unit there.

Q: Truman in 1948 integrated the services, but it was a slow process, wasn't it?

ATHANASON: In 1948, I was in New Jersey in the all black unit. There were three battalions. They started by bringing black officers in to the first battalion. The second and third still had white officers. When they did that, many of the NCOs (Non Commissioned Officers) of the first battalion tried to transfer to the second and third battalion. They did not want to serve under black officers. The black officers in those days were very substandard. They had no background; they were just picking them to try to get the thing started. Even though the battalion commander was a West Pointer, he was a black officer. And I would imagine he went through hell at West Point in those days. His name was Fowler. I don't know whatever happened to him later- whether he went up in rank or anything.

We started getting lectures then about integration. I remember being in the theater listening to various people talk about integration. The black officers were in the same room with us. Everything was going to be changed, but I didn't see any change until 1950, which was two years later. I was called by my colonel (I was a battery commander at the time) and I was called to come up to headquarters to pick up a replacement. This was unusual because it wasn't the battery commander's job to pick up replacements, but I didn't question it. I got in my jeep and went up and my first sergeant was of course curious why I was called so he waited at the battery waiting for me to come back. I arrived at the battalion headquarters and the colonel was standing there with a black soldier.

I'd had discussions with [the colonel] about blacks in the past. He was from Pennsylvania, he was a Northerner. He said, "I know that you will be fair with this man, being you're from the South. The combination of the two, if he gets along well, it's going to be an example for the others because we're going to be getting more black soldiers." We didn't call them black then, that was a dirty word. We called them "Negroes." So I said, "Fine." His military specialist was a cook and I was short of cooks so I was very happy to get him. He was a young lad about eighteen years old and his name was Jim Brown. I remember his name very well because there was a football player later. I'm sure it's not the same one. Who knows, I wonder if it was...

So, I put him in the jeep and took him back to the battery and the first sergeant was waiting at the entrance, curious why I had to go up there. He saw him and said, "Oh." So I said, "Take Jim down to the kitchen truck and get him squared in. He's going to be working for the mess sergeant." I went to my tent. Ten minutes later, the first sergeant came there with Brown and he said, "Brown wants to talk to you. I got a problem." I said, "Jesus Christ, you've only been here ten minutes, you know." I said, "What's your problem?" He said, "Well, I don't want to cook." "What do you mean you don't want to cook?" (I thought he was being belligerent). But, he wasn't. He said, "I want a dangerous job. I want the most dangerous job you got." I asked him why, he said, "Because I've got to prove my self." I sent him up with the infantry to carry a radio. It was the most dangerous job you could have because you had a nine foot antenna.

Q: Look, "shoot at me"...

ATHANASON: The enemy wanted to get rid of the artillery number one. So I sent him up there and two weeks later he came down to pick up some supplies and he wanted to see me again and he said, "I'm ready to cook." So I put him back in the kitchen.

From then on we started getting a few more and by the time I left, ten percent of the unit was black- maybe not that high. Being the unit came from Hawaii, most of the soldiers in that command were either Japanese or Hawaiian or Chinese descent. They were a fine bunch of people. I never had a day of trouble with any of them. And, I think they were probably more tolerant.

Q: I'd like to sort of fast forward. After the Korean War, where did you go?

ATHANASON: I left Korea. It seemed like the military schools always prepare you for the job you left, rather than the job you were going to. My battalion in Korea had an extremely good reputation for being the finest artillery battalion in Korea. We were doing everything like a great musician that didn't know how to read music. We didn't do the fine things in artillery, we just shot a lot and fast. So, when I came back I was sent to the advanced artillery school which I should have had before. So, I went there and the first thing I did was get married.

Q: Where did you meet your wife?

ATHANASON: I met my wife in Greenville South Carolina, she was my niece's best friend so when I was stationed in Fort Benning, I would go up and visit and that's where I met her. We got engaged before I left for Korea and got married as soon as I got back. In fact, we had a civil ceremony before I left. Nobody knew about it except my wife and her sister. We didn't consummate the wedding until after I got back.

We were sent to Fort Sill. This was July and the course didn't start until September. Here I was a young captain who'd been to Korea. I had all the main jobs in the artillery that they were trying to teach at Fort Sill. I had the Silver Star, the Purple Heart. So I was sort of a nice commodity for them. They asked me if I would teach leadership until my course started. I got back in the teaching business. I was able to write my own classes and they went over big. I had fun teaching leadership to young officers.

When my course started, I had to quit teaching and go in to my course. Colonel Stuart who was then assigned to the Pentagon assigning artillery officers, that was his job. He came out to Fort Sill. I had him at the house for dinner one evening. It was the first time he ever thanked me for saving his life. He never did before. He was such a proud individual he couldn't get the words out of his mouth to thank anybody for anything. He broke down in front of my wife and thanked me. He said, "I'm going to arrange for you to go on ROTC duty because you only have two years of college and universities do not accept officers without degrees. I've made arrangements for the University of Washington, Seattle to accept you. So, I'm going to send you there. They've agreed that they'll let you go to college at the same time you're teaching." So that's where we went next: we went to the University of Washington.

We arrived there in the summer months when the school was out. The ROTC students were in summer camp. I did meet the man I was replacing, it was a lieutenant colonel's position. He was head of the department, so I as a captain took over his department. He took me in the office and said, "All the lesson plans are here in these cabinets. The students are anti-military. This whole state is anti-military." (I didn't realize it then, I realize it now. Washington). "There's great fishing and hunting up here so don't let it bother you. Have a good time. Goodbye." I looked through his cabinets and found lesson plans that had nothing on them.

Q: You were saying you found training aids...

ATHANASON: Training aids, everything you'd want to teach good classes, but he didn't have any interest. So when the students got back in September, I found them to be very interested. I didn't find this anti-military [attitude]. Of course, they wanted to avoid going to Korea too. They were all lining up to try to join the tech services or quartermaster. We had a quartermaster and transportation unit. They avoided infantry and artillery. The ones that I had, I took them on field trips to Fort Lewis or wherever I could take them. I worked with them at night, anytime. I found them to be very interested and gung ho.

In the mean time I was taking political science, which meant I had to be in school every day in uniform. I would have to run about two blocks to class, take a class, and run back and teach a class. I did this for two years. During lunch time I was trying to grade papers at the same time eating my lunch at the desk. It was a very hard two years. I came within five hours of a degree when I got orders to leave. I needed five more hours of some humanities. I had top grades. I had matured a lot more. Political science was a lot easier than engineering. I had some pretty famous professors. I had one who had written the first book about Korean history that had been written. He was teaching. I forget their names now, but he was... I had another one who was supposed to be a China expert and another one who sounded and looked like Kissinger and he was a Russian expert. I enjoyed it. There were six naval officers sent there by the navy to take political science. I let them use the ROTC building to study and use the mimeograph machine. I organized them into a team. We split up the study in to six parts. Each person could thoroughly research something rather than six parts then we would join together so we always had the top grades of every class.

Anyway, I came within five hours. The Dean called me in and he said I should ask for an extension to stay there in the summer. I did that and I was refused by the army. They were willing to send me to college on government money, but I was on my own. They wouldn't give me sixty more days. That's the bureaucracy. The Dean said, "Can you speak a foreign language?" I said, "Well, I know some Greek." He wrote a note and said, "Go over and see professor so-and-so in the classics department and if you pass the test we'll give you five hours." So I went over to the classics department and they gave me a book of Homer in ancient Greek to read out of and translate. It was like giving me something in Chinese- no correlation. I said, "I'm sorry. I don't know." He said, "Well that's the best I can do." He sent me back to the Dean. I went back and he said, "Go to the history department. There's a Greek professor on loan from the Athens University. See what he can do." So I went there. He gave me a letter from his wife to read and write a paragraph back and tell [him] what the letter said. They gave me five hours so I got my degree in political science.

Q: Then where did you go?

ATHANASON: The reason they wouldn't give me the extension, they were organizing a new division at Fort Knox, Kentucky. A third armored division. They started a new concept of reforger...

Q: Reforgery. That was this idea of prepositioning stuff...

ATHANASON: No it wasn't that, that came later. Anyway, they were sending new units over to Germany to replace a whole division. I was sent to Fort Knox to go to the third armored division. I was a captain at the time. I arrived there and the colonel of the battalion that I was assigned to was a very fine, easy-going person. The executive officer was a major that was very easy-going too, sort of a fish out of water, sort of an intellect with the troops. Both of them didn't really want to dirty their hands much with the troops. So they made me the operations officer which was another major's position. They pretty much let me run the battalion which was great. And I went to Germany with that battalion after one year. We stayed there for three years.

Q: You were there from when to when?

ATHANASON: Germany? Probably 1956-1959.

Q: What was the perception of an army officer in the artillery...the likelihood of a battle with the Soviets and what would happen? Were you thinking in those terms?

ATHANASON: Again, every unit was training for that mission. That was foremost in our mind. We didn't get into the politics of it. Nobody cared. You just do your job. We had frequent alerts at two or three o'clock in the morning and you'd have to clear your barracks within thirty minutes and go to your battle position. We were trained to do that. The thought was that the Russians were ten feet tall. They had so many tanks that they would overwhelm us in a couple of weeks. We'd fall back to the Rhine River so we had to do as much damage as possible right at the beginning which meant free use of nuclear weapons.

Q: Did your outfit have nuclear weapons at that time?

ATHANASON: Not at that time because at that time, the direct support weapon for the infantry was the 105. Being it's an armored division, it was self-propelled 105s which was our first experience with armored units when we went to Fort Knox. I'd always been with towed units. It made me a believer of armor after that. The only nuclear we had at the time was the Honest John rocket.

Q: That wasn't in your...

ATHANASON: It was in the division artillery, but not in my battalion. There were core units, a corporal missile. So, corps was the main... and the engineers had nuclear demolitions that they would plant.

Q: What were you doing before you went to Greece? Did you get involved in the Vietnam War?

ATHANASON: Yes. Well, when we were in Germany, this trip is when I ended up in East Germany.

Q: Oh let's talk about that. Explain what happened. Give us some detail.

ATHANASON: There was one training area in Germany called Grafenwoehr where all the units used to go to fire live ammunition. After serving in this battalion for about two years, I was transferred to the headquarters and put in the operations section which meant I moved to Frankfurt from Gelnhausen. One of the jobs I had in the operations was to test units in the field. We would set up test teams and go to Grafenwoehr. When a battalion was ready to take their test, we would act as umpires and we would test and score them. That meant going to Grafenwoehr often and we used to go back and forth from Frankfurt to Grafenwoehr by helicopter, these test teams.

One particular time that I was back home for the weekend, simultaneously with that, the artillery came out with a new insignia that had a missile vertically between the two cannons. No one had bought those yet because they just came out. I happened to go to the PX that Saturday and they had them for sale and I bought the new insignia. The next morning, early, we went to church and I was in my class A uniform (summer khaki which is bloused) with my new insignia. After church, they dropped me off at the helicopter pad.

Q: This is what year?

ATHANASON: 1958. I had a daughter that was two and a half years old or three years old, close to four then. My son Mike was just four months old. So, I was dropped off at the air strip to go back to Grafenwoehr. I did not change clothes. I was still in Class A uniform. There were eight others waiting there on the same helicopter to go. Of course, I knew the artillery men well because I worked with them. I did not know the pilot or the copilot. I did not know the master sergeant, the only enlisted man aboard. He was an infantry master sergeant hitching a ride, getting back. There was an infantry first lieutenant that I didn't know. He was hitching a ride. But, the others were compatriots of mine. There were nine total in the helicopter.

It was normally a two hour flight from Frankfurt to Grafenwoehr. It was an H-19 helicopter, like a Tadpole. Pilot and copilot sat up high. In the passenger compartment, you were sort of looking at the heels of their boots at your level. They were all in fatigue uniforms, all of them, except for me. I was the oddball because I went straight from church. We took off. By the way, in the group, the pilot was a first lieutenant. The copilot was a warrant officer. There were two majors, in this group, both artillery majors. One was a West Pointer. And, one was a reserve officer. The reserve officer was the senior officer aboard. There were three captains. I was the second ranking captain. Then there was this infantry first lieutenant and the master sergeant. So we took off and I was sitting next to one of the majors. We both were sort of dozing off. I had just received a book from "The Book of the Month Club." It was written by Liddell Hart. It was The Red Army.

Q: Liddell Hart was a main British military writer?

ATHANASON: Yes, I think the title was The Red Army. I was reading it till I started getting a little drowsy. The weather was great, sunshine. I laid the book down and sort of closed my eyes and dozed off awhile. Then, I looked at my watch and it was two hours. By this time I was getting a little woozy because I didn't like flying in a helicopter that long. I was wondering...I nudged the major and said, "We should be there by now." He said, "Well I don't know." All of a sudden the helicopter made a 180 degree turn. I asked him, "What the hell's going on? I think we're lost." He said, "No, no, he hit a checkpoint." I said, "We don't hit a checkpoint and make a 180 turn." So I reached up and grabbed the pilot's boot and shook it. He looked down at me and gave me a look on his face like 'I don't know what the hell's going on.' I went and sat back down and told the major, I said, "That SOB is lost." We looked out the window and saw the Autobahn with no cars on it. I said, "We're in East Germany because the Autobahn should be full of cars." He said, "No, no, we couldn't possibly be."

We flew over this building that had a lot of red flags on it. The pilot circled the building twice. Then we saw guard towers and he took off in a different direction. We saw a farmer with a couple of horses plowing a field and we landed the helicopter right next to him. One of the captains spoke a little German so he went out and asked the farmer, "Where are we?" He came back and said, "We're in East Germany. We better get the hell out quick and go in that direction." The German was trying to help us. The pilot took off.

We saw the Autobahn again and saw a lone car going down the Autobahn. So he on his own landed the helicopter in front of the car. The pilot didn't even have a map with him. They had flown that mission every day, the milk run. They didn't even carry a map with them. They just sort of slept/put on cruise control. But, that day something happened. We got out of the helicopter. The man in the car had an old Shell map from the 1930s, a road map. He showed us where we were and told us where the border was. He suggested we take off in a hurry. They were all very helpful once we talked to them.

I saw the pilot and copilot get into an argument. I said, "What's going on?" The copilot said, "We don't have enough fuel to take off. The pilot said, "We've got to go, no question, we've got to go." The copilot said, "No, if we start to take off and if the engine quits, we've had it." I turned around. Again the two majors sort of sat there silent. I spoke up and I said, "What will happen if the engine quits?" The pilot said, "Well if I'm up high enough, there's no problem. I'll bring it back down." I said, "Quit arguing. Let's get the hell out of here, right now." He said, "Okay." I said, "Does anyone have any classified documents with them?" This first lieutenant who I didn't know put his hand on his pocket and he said, "I have the division SOI here." (Which were all the codes). I said, "Give me the damned thing." He said, "No, I'm signed for it. I can't let anybody have it." I said, "Quit arguing and give it to me." I got a lighter from somebody and we burned it right there and left the ashes. We got in the helicopter and took off.

We were headed towards the border. We were up about two and a half, three minutes and the engine quit. But he was high enough like he said that he was going to come down, but unfortunately, we were over a thick forest area. He was looking for a clearing, he saw a little clearing towards the front and he put it into a steep glide to make that clearing. I guess he picked up too much momentum and he couldn't slow it down or he didn't have enough experience to slow it down. We crashed and flipped end over end a couple of times. But, there was no fire because there was no fuel. So we sat there. No one was hurt. We were wondering, what next?

Farmers started appearing around the perimeter of this opening. None of them approached us. They stayed at a distance. About fifteen minutes later, three vehicles drove up. Two of them were Mercedes, open, convertible type sedans, just like the old German movies, you know, the "Hogan's Heroes" types, and the other was a small Opel. They unloaded a truck that had soldiers in it. They made a perimeter about two hundred yards around us. No one approached us. When we were all in place, one of the officers started walking toward us. Our senior major went out to greet him. Then he came back and he said, "We have to get loaded in the vehicles." We assumed they were going to take us home or back to the border. They took me aside and loaded the others in the cars. They put me in the Opel with two thugs in the back seat. There was just enough room, they were both big guys. I realized they were treating me differently for some reason.

We headed on the Autobahn and passed a place called Karl-Marx-Stadt. (Zwickauer was the name of the town before they named it Karl-Marx-Stadt). Then they turned off the road and went to an abandoned concentration camp, barbed wire and all. We drove through the gate and stopped the car and looked at me and then they started laughing then they drove away again. I guess they were trying to get my reaction. They took us in to the town of Zwickauer. The others had already gotten there and they were in a big room. They took me past them in to a cell by myself. A little bit later, I could hear the others were eating some sausage and bread. We left around noon from Frankfurt so we were all hungry. We didn't even eat lunch. We thought we'd be in Grafenwoehr by two o'clock. They didn't give me anything to eat.

They started interrogations that night. They were East Germans, they were not Russians. That night a bunch of high-ranking Russians arrived. They were waiting for them to arrive before they talked to us. They interrogated the group before they got to me. They were interrogating them as a group, but they took me in by myself. There were four or five Russian generals sitting at a table. They put me in a chair in front of them. There were statues of Karl Marx, Engels, and Stalin. Actually it was a picture of Stalin. Karl Marx and Lenin. First question the Russian general asked through the interpreter (by the way, the interpreter spoke Oxford English). He was a young, East German lieutenant. Nice looking young man. They wanted to know who these [statues] were. I said, "Karl Marx, Lenin." They said, "You're the only one of the nine who know who these men are." I didn't say I took political science. They said, "You should teach them something about these men. They were great heroes." I said, "Yeah, yeah." They asked me what unit I was from. I said, "It's right there, there's the patch: third armor division."

I gave them my name, rank, and serial number. I wouldn't answer any other questions. They said, "Are you a special artillery man? You have a missile. You wear a different uniform. We are very interested in your Honest John." (That was the only rocket we had at the tactical level). I said, "I know nothing about Honest John." They questioned me for several hours. I wasn't answering. They were doing the talking. They finally took me back to the cell. I was starving by that time. The next day around noon they came and got me again and took me into a mess hall and gave me a couple of chunks of pork, they were deep fried and some boiled potatoes. It tasted great. The interpreter was interested to find out if I'd ever seen Elvis Presley because he was in our division.

Q: That's right.

ATHANASON: I said, "No, he's not in my town, he's in a different town. I've never seen him. They liked Elvis Presley. That afternoon the East Germans, in my sight, signed a receipt for us and took control. They put us in the sealed up truck. We drove for a couple of hours and came to what looked like an abandoned warehouse. They already had nine cots set up in one room. The interrogation continued, but this time by East Germans. When I was called in, they had my book laid on the table, the Liddell Hart book. They wanted to know if it was my book. I said, "Yes." They said, "We've looked at it. It's all wrong." And, they had a pile of ashes on the table. They wanted to know what those ashes were. They said, "You burned something, what was it?" I didn't give them any information.

We stayed there about a day and a half. Then they put us in a closed truck again and drove a couple of hours to a very nice villa. It had a walled in yard. There were a lot of guards there. We ended up staying there for about a week. A lot of things happened during that week. They were interested a lot about the artillery. They called me in one day and said, "We brought an artillery specialist from Berlin and he wants to talk with you." He said, "I'm artillery, you're artillery. We are comrades. I'll tell you all you want to know about my artillery and you tell me about yours." I said, "I don't give a damn about your artillery. I don't want to know anything about it." He said, "Aren't you interested?" I said, "No, not interested." He said, "How do you shoot your artillery?" I said, "An officer says fire, an enlisted man pulls the langer, and it goes bang." He said, "No, no, no, I don't mean that." He asked, "From the observation post..." I said, "You get a big long rope and you pull it." The guys had their ears to the wall upstairs. He said, "I don't mean that, how do you fire it?" I said, "Long rope." They started hollering up there, "Long rope, long rope" and they were beating the floor with their feet. They got mad at me and threw me out. So I got to be known as "long rope" after that. When they took the sergeant in, he would only answer their questions with two words, "bull crap." The more they would ask him, the louder he would get until they'd get sick of him then they'd throw him out.

We found that they were threatening us. But, I don't think they were going to do any harm to us because they allowed us to walk in pairs in the yard twenty minutes a day. One of the captains was quite a joker. He and I were a bad team. We would always whisper and look at the openings in the walls when a guard was watching and it drove them crazy because they figured we were trying to figure a way to get out. In fact, we took the keys to our room away from one of the lieutenants one night. He was dozing off and one of the guys went over and slipped it right off his belt and got his pistol at the same time. When they were going up to lock us up, he couldn't find his key or his pistol and sat there and begged us, "Please give it back." There's a lot of comedy in this too. And then they moved us three or four more times. Usually in the middle of the night they would wake us up and tell us to dress. They gave us athletic clothes to wear. We went to another big villa. It had a wall around it again. Obviously no body had lived in it for years. There were no toilet seats. There were cobwebs everywhere. But immediately the next day workers came and started renovating the place. That had happened in another place we went to so we thought this was a ploy on their part to get some villas, get the government to fix up something maybe for the local commander. That's where we were on the fourth of July. Of course we had 48 states then.

The major who was in charge of the interior guard didn't speak a word of English. At every meal he would come in and click his heels and say, "Bon appetite." And we all in unison would say, "We hope you choke." And he would say, "Danke schoen. (Thank you)." This went on (because when we move, he moved with us) for six weeks. He came in on July the third and said, "Tomorrow is an American holiday. So is there anything special you want?" One of the guys said, "I want ham and eggs." He said, "We can take care of that." Because our meals were all basically the same: in the morning, we'd have hot tea and brown bread. At lunch we'd have hot tea, brown bread, and cucumbers. At night, hot tea, brown bread, cucumbers, and potato soup. We never had a drink of water in six weeks. Now they ate the same thing. They didn't have anything more to eat than that. So when we asked for ham and eggs, it was something special. They said, "We can take care of that." They turned around to me and said, "What do you want?" I said, "I want four tanks to fire a forty-eight gun salute and an American flag I can raise up." They said, "No, no, no." This was going through an interpreter so the major is smiling like "yes, yes" then when he hears what it is, "no, no." Something like ham and eggs, "okay."

The next morning we had ham and eggs and lo and behold three Russian tanks came by. I told the interpreter, "Thank the major, but I want to know where the fourth tank is." He said, "Those are not your tanks, they happen to be..." We did everything we could to needle them and make their life miserable. One morning we got up and noticed a lot of flags hanging every where, red flags. A couple of television cameras were set up. They all seemed to wear a clean collar because they always seemed to wear filthy collars (they had high top uniforms). They wouldn't let us out of our room that morning for breakfast.

We're sitting there in our underwear trying to see out of a crack of a window. We were trying to see what's going on outside because we could see a lot of cars coming, pulling up. All of a sudden flash cameras went off behind us. We turned around and there were a bunch of people standing there with cameras. We had a few choice words about that. But, they said, "These are journalists that want to ask questions and we're going to have a press conference downstairs. So, get dressed. You all can come down, but only one person is going to be allowed to talk. And, that's the senior man. He's the only one that's going to be allowed in the room. The rest of you must sit in the hall and wait." So then we told him to get the hell out and we'd talk about it. As they moved out of the room, one of the guys handed one of our guys a slip of paper, wadded up in his fist. They left the room and closed the door. The fella who had it opened it and the paper said, "I am a journalist with United Press. My name is Seymour Topping. I was called to East Berlin this morning and wasn't told where I was going, but they said get in the car. They brought me here. Please don't refuse to have a press conference because we don't know what's going on and only through a press conference can we find out what's going on."

We discussed that and the consensus was this was a trick. We weren't going to have a press conference. I and one of the others insisted that we do it because we had nothing to lose. We finally agreed to it. We went downstairs. The major, they sat him in a room by himself, but we could see what was going on because there was a half door, you could see over it. They started peppering him with questions like: Why did you come to spy on a sovereign country? Why did you bring in these secret, dangerous weapons? Like I said, he was the weakest person in the whole group. Rather than fight back at them, he just sat there. The spy equipment that we had aboard, I think he was a first lieutenant, he had a camera, an Argus C3 personal camera. The major carried a plastic 45 in his holster because he didn't like to clean his real weapon.

That was the extent of our weaponry and spy equipment. They hammered on this business of a sovereign country. 'We are East Germany and we have nothing to do with the Russians. You came and violated our territories. You are war criminals.' Well I heard as much of this as I could take and I busted in the room and told a few of them what I thought of them, especially the ones from England and France. There were reporters from the communist papers. The Daily Worker was one. I told them what I thought of them and in the meantime they tried to drag me out. I broke lose from them and said, "You're not a damn sovereign country. I was interrogated by Russian generals. The Russians signed a receipt when they turned us over to the East Germans and the East Germans accepted us from the Russians."

Seymour Topping was writing like mad and the others weren't writing anything. They drug me out of the room and the next night we were put in the closed truck and moved again to another location. At that location, it was the first time they brought a television set. Their TV programs were all propaganda films. They couldn't stand Hitler so I and three of the others grew a mustache like Hitler. That irritated the hell out of them. Political programs, quiz shows like for five marks, where was Karl Marx born? It was that kind of stuff. We didn't want to listen to their damn television and told them to turn it off. But, the guards for the first time had seen television so they wanted to watch it. They would sit there with their noses glued to the television. The only way we could get them to turn it off was if we asked to go to the bathroom. When we'd go, someone would have to go with you while you sat on the head. They gave us magazines like China Reconstructs. We'd sit there for twenty minutes and he's trying to listen to TV. and watch you at the same time. Finally we'd get up and another guy would say, "I've got to go now." After about the fourth one, they realized what we were doing and turned the TV, off.

At this location I saw how they operated with their enlisted men. They gave them a political class every day, three to four hours. They had notebooks, they had to take notes. I didn't know what they were telling them, but it was obviously political training. They ran it like a group discussion. We thought at this point: we're at a stalemate, we've been here for over six weeks.

Before we moved to the new location, I was called up in to the attic one night. I sat in a chair with a bright light shining down on me. I couldn't see the face of the person talking to me. He shoved two documents in front of me to sign. One was in English and one was in German. I was denying ever making statements that the Russians had ever seen us. What we didn't know was that Seymour Topping, the very next day, put in the New York Times saying that we said that the Russians had control of us. The Russians had denied any knowledge of us in the past. There was some agreement between the status of forces that they were supposed to release anyone who came across the line and we were supposed to do the same thing. So that put the Russians in a bad position. That's why he wanted me to sign the document. I refused to sign it. He threatened me that if I didn't sign it, they would take me out the next day and I would never see my family again. So I said, "So be it. Let me go back downstairs." We knew we were in a stalemate then.

By this time, I was not allowed to speak to anyone because I was giving them a hard time. I was only able to speak through the ranking man. I insisted that he demand that we see the East German President, Walter Ulbricht. They asked why and I said, 'because you keep telling us that our country can come and get us anytime they want as long as they sign a receipt for us. The receipt would have a letterhead on it that said German Democratic Republic and that's why our government will not sign it. So we want to propose to Ulbricht to turn us over to Czechoslovakia.' They said, "No you can't see Ulbricht."

A couple days later we saw the flags go up, the TV. cameras set up, the clean collars come out and they had a green felt cloth on a table with a microphone and a chair behind it. They told the ranking man, "Sit behind the microphone." He said, "No, you sit there because if it's Ulbricht, you talk to him. I don't want to talk to him." So I sat behind the microphone. They didn't object to it. In walks a very impressive looking gentleman about six foot two wearing a nice suit with white hair and a Red Cross button on his lapel. He introduced himself in perfect English as being head of the East German Red Cross. He said we were going to be released that day. He said, "Go upstairs and get your belongings. Be out here in twenty minutes and load onto this bus and we'll take you to the border."

We didn't have any belongings up to that point because a few days before that they'd given us some boxes received from Frankfurt, stuff that our families had sent us. Vickie had sent me some red slippers, some cigars, someone else got a beret. We got in the bus. This time they didn't blindfold us or block out the windows. We drove straight to the border. There was another distinguished looking gentleman; he was head of the American Red Cross. He said, "Please be on good behavior. They haven't agreed to let you go yet. We're going to negotiate and I refused to negotiate unless they brought you all here. So I can see that you all are well." We told him that if things don't go well, drop a pen on the floor and we're going to take off.

There were tourists crossing that border crossing. And no way were we going to go back. They could shoot us if they wanted, but we didn't think they would dare do that if we got mixed in with the tourists. He said, "No please don't do that" and he took extra pains to hang on to his pencil. He turned around and smiled at us and nodded his head to say, "Everything is all right." They agreed to pay for our room and board and we agreed that we didn't want the helicopter.

We walked across the bridge, each of us carrying a cardboard box. They took us down the road and there were some tents set up and there were field rangers and they were cooking steaks, they had a nice table set up and we had steak. Then we went back to Frankfurt and then we had debriefing for two days from our own intelligence people. They wanted to know minute details about what sounds we heard, anything we could describe where we were. Of course, we didn't know where we were, but there was one location with a train that came by a certain time of day and we told them about that.

I told them about the incident in the attic where I refused to sign the paper. No one told me whether they believed me or not, they didn't comment on it. They just said, "Fine." Then we went back to work. There was no fanfare, there were no yellow ribbons, or any of that kind of stuff, we just went back to work. We shaved our mustaches off.

Then about a week later, it was about ten o'clock at night, someone knocked on my door, there was a young man there, he showed me his identification. He was counterintelligence, U.S. and he said he wanted to come see me earlier, but he couldn't. But now certain things have happened and he was able to talk to me. He was a Greek American and because I was Greek American, he wanted to tell me how proud he was that I refused to sign that document. The way he knew that I refused to sign the document was because it was one of our top agents telling me to sign the document.

They found out about him being a U.S. agent and he was killed, but they were able to get his wife and child in to Switzerland. Now that he was dead, he was able to come talk to me. That made me feel good. Also, that was the first point that I knew that they knew where we were all the time. Why they were asking us all those questions was maybe to verify secondary information. But, they knew where we were all the time. It made me feel good to know that we had somebody, somebody planned it at that high level because this guy that was questioning me that night came in a big Mercedes, he was a pretty high official. I couldn't tell his rank because it was dark, but I saw his car.

That was about it. Not a lot of things happened in between. I saw how isolated they were. They believed the propaganda they were giving us. During interrogation a high ranking official like a colonel would tell me, "I know that 200,000 people died of hunger in the United States within the last week..." I said, "No." He wanted to know, was my family from the working class. I said, "Yes, I had a father who was a shoemaker and a brother who was also." He said, "How did this brother live?" I said, "He had a Chris-Craft and that took a lot of his money." He said, "Ah this Chris-Craft took his money from him. What was this Chris-Craft?" I said, "A boat."

They believed their own propaganda. At one point they had a map on the wall and they wanted me to explain to them how Russia was the aggressor. They had Russia and all our missile bases plotted all around Russia. They said who is the aggressor? Of course, I didn't exchange discussion with them. I would just sit there and listen. Then they had another picture they brought in with Little Rock.

Q: High school segregation?

ATHANASON: Soldiers with bayonets and they said, "Explain your democracy to us." Of course, you don't answer, you just sit there. Those were going through their head. They rubbed Sputnik in our faces, how far they were ahead of us... they were peace-loving people. The colonel in charge said he was a banker in civilian life; he wasn't a militarist like us. They never laid a hand on us, they threatened. They gave us meat one time in six weeks besides the ham and eggs. In fact, it was the same day, they gave us hamburger, but it was raw (steak tartar). One of the captains, his wife was German and he had eaten it in his house. So, when they brought it out to us, we said take it out of here and go cook it. He said, "Leave mine the way it is." They cooked ours for us. The next day he broke out in a rash over his whole body. I don't know whether it was a coincidence or the meat caused it. They brought in a doctor, gave him a white night robe to wear, and covered him with calamine lotion. He was the joker and he would walk around acting like a ghost, scaring them. They did bring a doctor in. They brought us some chocolates once that had cognac in them. We ate them pretty fast and we wanted some more but they said, "That's all you get. We can't get any more."

Q: Moving up to Greece...

ATHANASON: Let me add one thing there. I was insisting the whole time that we had to escape. I think this is important in a way. Being there were nine of us, the West Point major was a very silent guy. He was a sharp guy, I had a lot of respect for him back in the garrison, but he didn't stand up and take a lead. The other major was very weak and not too smart. Both captains agreed with me, the sergeant said, "Sir I'll do anything you say." The pilot and the copilot were in between, the infantry first lieutenant agreed with me, the senior major did not, and the other major kept silent. The only way I could get them to agree was we set a time limit: if we weren't out by my birthday of the first of August, they would agree. This was early July so that gave them three weeks. So we started making a plan.

At the particular place where we were, there was a toilet that we would be allowed to use at night that had a small window and over a period of time, we loosened the hinges every time we'd go in there which we could take it out. The Germans didn't know that. There was a trellis right below the window it overhung the entrance where the cars would come in. You could walk out on the trellis and jump over the wall. The plan was, we'd get out through there, jump out in our athletic clothes so we would get in to a running formation and be jogging on the road. If we were stopped I would talk to whoever stopped us in Greek and try to make them think we were a team from Greece practicing for something. Everybody else would keep their mouths shut. We didn't know if that would work, but we didn't know... We'd look for road signs to see where in the hell we were. We didn't know where we were. In order to make that work though, between two and four o'clock in the morning, they reduced the guard out in front of us to one officer. And he sat in a chair. We watched him and usually he would doze.

It would have meant having to incapacitate him in some way and the best way to do that would be to kill him until we got away. We realized if they caught us, we'd suffer the consequences if we did kill this guy. What we didn't know and it was never made clear to us during the interrogation, our people interrogating us what would be our status if we got home. Would we be heroes for breaking out and following the code of conduct even though we killed someone in peace time? Or would we be considered as murdering someone? We never got an answer to that. No one would answer that question. I thought it was very important that they answer that question and brief the people in Europe that were in a similar situation so they'd know what to do, but they wouldn't do it. I never got satisfaction from that.

Q: How did you end up in Greece?

ATHANASON: After coming back from Germany at that time, I went to Command and General Staff College which prepared me for the jobs I had in Germany. It's always one after. I had division and corps training and I went to the Pentagon, research and development which was very interesting. From there I went to Vietnam. After Vietnam, I went to, let me throw in one point there: by this point, I'm a lieutenant colonel, and the dream of any lieutenant colonel in the artillery is not to go to the pentagon, but to command an artillery battalion. I was assigned to command an artillery battalion when I returned. It was at Fort Benning, Georgia again where I'd been before. This battalion was part of the eleventh air assault division. It was an experimental division. We were developing the helicopter tactics.

When I arrived at the division, the battalion I took over had all top-notch people in it because they had the pick of the army for this air assault division. The officers were all top-notch. But, I found out very quickly that they knew very little about artillery. They concentrated on loading helicopters and moving and unloading the helicopters. Everything was helicopter oriented. They had an exercise in North Carolina, their final exercise. They referred to that exercise as being like World War III, everything that they learned at that exercise was supposed to work. I was of a different thinking because number one, I didn't come up with them through that mentality.

The battalion had all their vehicles turned in because they used helicopters. The helicopters were dead lined at the time so rather than let us sit around, I went and borrowed trucks from the post. I started training that battalion as a regular artillery battalion. That raised morale a lot too because they were learning things they had not done before. Then they alerted this division to go to Vietnam. It was redesignated the first cavalry division. I was called in to the commanding general's office along with the division artillery commander and told that I had to give my battalion up.

The policy was that if you had just come back from Vietnam, you couldn't go back. You've got to keep in mind that at this time people commanding battalions or regiments were all dying to go to Vietnam to foster their career.

Q: When I was there I found that there was a tremendous turnover because of people getting their ticket punched.

ATHANASON: That's right. So, me going back would deny someone getting their ticket punched because I already had mine punched. They looked at it that way. I said, "No I want to go back not because I want to go to Vietnam, but because I've been waiting so long to get a battalion, I finally got one, and I've only had it six months." He said, "Don't worry about that, I've already called Washington and they'll offer you a battalion at four different locations, you pick." Fort Lewis, Fort Hood, Fort Carson, and I forget where the hell the fourth one was, but as soon he as I heard Carson, I knew that was a pretty place with a lot of good rainbow trout fishing.

Q: I think it's Colorado.

ATHANASON: Yes, Colorado. So, he said, "However, until we go, we understand that you wrote a document on the use of artillery and counter insurgency while you were in Vietnam and that's the only thing that's been written. So, would you work with the G-3 Section and train the artillery battalions on what you know before they go?" Fine. The general ended up by saying, (this is the point I wanted to make about the mentality), "Don't feel bad that you're not going, we'll be back in about six months."

Q: This was when?

ATHANASON: 1965. I said, "General you're not going to be back in six months or six years and by the time we get back we're going to lose more than the French did. And, the people are going to hate us when we leave." He took that as a slap in the face, he didn't like that at all, that statement I made. My commander was standing behind me, the division artillery commander and he said, "You just don't understand these new tactics we have, you weren't here to go through this World War III in North Carolina. We have a thousand eyes in the sky in this division." I said, "Those thousand eyes are going to see a thousand tree tops." They took that as a defeatist attitude. I ran into this general three years later at the Pentagon and reminded him of our conversation and he apologized.

Q: Frank, just as an off side, this is extremely American, this attitude that the latest gimmick is going to do it. I remember in 1969 when I went through the Vietnam training center when I was going to be consul general in Saigon, the military was talking about how once they started equipping the village forces with M-16s, that was going to change everything. They always think a gimmick is going to do it.

ATHANASON: Well, the military are mission oriented. They can get the job done.

Q: Sometimes that helps, but things don't work this way.

ATHANASON: Vietnam was a very complicated situation. When I was there in 1965, there was an office out at Tan Son Nhut Air Base; I had two lieutenant colonel friends that worked together in that office. We had dinner together every night and they would say what a joke it was. They had a large wall map of each province. I don't know if you've ever been in that room. They took me down there and showed it to me one day. The province was on a chart about that big and the room was about four times this size. I forgot how many provinces there were in Vietnam.

Q: Twenty, thirty, something like that...

ATHANASON: Their job, there were about four lieutenant colonels and a bunch of master sergeants down there, their job every day was to color green, yellow, red, contested areas, free areas, and then they were photographed and sent to McNamara every day. McNamara was running it from the Pentagon.

Q: This was this provincial reporting. I know Foreign Service was involved in this too. Did you sleep in a place at night? Etc.

ATHANASON: The guys that worked there laughed about it, but that was their job.

Moving on...

ATHANASON: I commanded that battalion and commanded the one at Fort Carson. Then I was selected to go to the army war college. I went there and then worked at the Pentagon again. That's when I worked in the secretary of defense's office with the reserve forces. Shortly after, about eighteen months later, I got orders to go to Germany to command a division artillery which was a feather in my cap.

Q: You mentioned your artillery command in Germany, can you explain what that was?

ATHANASON: The next step on the ladder to get your ticket punched was to get a division artillery level command. I was lucky that I was selected after a very short stay at the Pentagon to get command of the third infantry division artillery located in Germany. This was the summer of 1970. When I arrived in Germany, I went to the town of Kitzigen, near Wï¿½rzburg. The division headquarters was in Wï¿½rzburg and the division artillery was in Kitzigen. I found out that the job, he wore two hats also. One was commander of the artillery and the other was (the senior officer of every town in Germany was called the community leader) so you in a sense became the American mayor or the post commander.

There was one brigade and division artillery in Kitzigen and I outranked the other colonel so I was the community leader. We had switched over 105 as direct support to 155s. The 155 were all nuclear capable. I had three battalions of 155, eighteen guns per battalion, one battalion of eight inch, that was another eighteen guns, and an Honest John battalion, so it was a total of five artillery battalions. These were not all in Kitzigen. I had them spread in four different towns in Germany so I had to commute to go check on them. Being the senior officer at Kitzigen, I was also given administrative control over the engineer battalion of the division and the maintenance battalion division, and also operational control of the air defense battalion that was in the separate town. In a sense, I had about eight battalions that I was concerned with. We had two nuclear sites where we stored the nuclear weapons. One was at Kitzigen and the other was at Bad Kitzigen which was further north. That's where we had all of our weapons stored. Conventional ammunition was stored on the weapons themselves because we had to move out at a moment's notice. I had remembered similar duty in the 1950s when I was in Germany at a much lower level as far as command how gung ho we were and how everybody was butting their butts to do a good job.

I was very disappointed with what I found when I got to Germany this time. I think the army was at its lowest level. We were getting people there that had three or four months left to do in the army. When they left Vietnam, they sent them to Germany so they came over there with a bad attitude. We still had the draft so a lot of these were draftees. We were short of key personnel. The division artillery head, something like 29 to 30 company, battery sized units and I would say 80 percent were commanded by first lieutenants, not captains. I had maybe 20 percent of the majors that I was authorized. I did have all of the lieutenant colonels. But, it was a period of low morale, low discipline, race problems, hashish problems, something that I was shocked by when I got there, because the last unit I'd left in the United States before going to the war college was the number one outfit. But, the army had gone to hell over a three year period. It just completely went down hill. It was a challenge, how to deal with this. I tried to do it by increasing the amount of training, by getting away from the barracks and going to training areas more often, doing more shooting than what they did before. If I had a goal to do a hundred percent progress, I maybe reached 60 percent. It was a challenge.

Q: One of the things you've alluded to prior to this interview was the problem of nuclear weapons storage with this particular group of people.

ATHANASON: We had to use, of course, guards for these nuclear weapons sites and they were sites that were away from the barracks area. They were out in the woods. They had double, concertina wire fencing around them and burrs and igloos where the ammunition was stored. You had to select the best people in the whole division artillery to use them as guards because you put people out there to guard who were unhappy, they would do more damage than good. And you couldn't really trust them to stay on the job. It was always a challenge to find enough people to guard those sites, not only from sabotage, organized sabotage. I kept worrying about the big hippy movement in Germany at the time, local young people. Peace movements just like the peace movements in the States. What would happen if we had one of these sites overrun by a bunch of young German hippies and we had to fire on them? That was, of course, the order that we had. That kept me awake many nights.

Q: You had a significant portion of a nuclear arsenal under your control, how did you envisage if the Soviets tried something? What did you think might happen?

ATHANASON: We started with a premise as I told you earlier, that they would overrun us very fast back to the Rhine River unless we could stop them and the only way you could stop them was with a tactical or nuclear weapons. I was always of the belief that tactical or nuclear weapons could not be used alone. If we ever got to the point that we fired a tactical or nuclear weapons then our country should be prepared to fire strategic weapons at the same time. If you fired the tactical nuclear weapons, you didn't know how he would answer you if he would use his tactical nuclear weapons or attack you with a strategic. I don't see how a president could have taken a chance; he'd have to use both. That was not our policy, however. The policy was that you would stop them with the tactical nuclear weapons. All of our exercises were based on that. We had preselected targets usually avenues of approach. The engineers had locations they would move out to and plant nuclear demolitions. All of our exercises were based on firing a lot of tactical nuclear weapons.

Q: That's a very sobering thought when you think about it.

ATHANASON: Yes.

Q: Going on to your assignment to Greece, when did this happen and what was it?

ATHANASON: To leave Germany, that assignment was a one a half year assignment. Usually a culmination of that would be that you'd probably get promoted to brigadier general. I didn't get promoted to brigadier general, but I was assigned to be the chief of staff of the division which was a very sought after position. That certainly gave me another shot at it the following board meeting the next year. At the last minute I was told that someone else was going to get that job. That someone else was a colonel who was pretty well thought of and later became chief of staff of the army.

Q: Who was that?

ATHANASON: John Wickham. He got the job. Then, I ended up going to Vietnam again and I didn't want to go. When I got there I found there was a general waiting on me a Ton Sen Ute and that he'd arranged it thinking that he'd done me a favor.

Q: One of your friends.

ATHANASON: Yes. So after being there for a year...

Q: What were you doing there?

ATHANASON: I was senior advisor to the second armored division up north at Quang Ni and then we moved to Chua Li when the American division over there moved out. We took over their area. While I was there, I came home for Christmas two week period and I went to the Pentagon, actually the Hoffman building where they had all our records and wanted to know what they had in mind for me when I got back. I was pretty much told that they had expected me to have gotten promoted and there was still a chance next September.

They were going to bring me back in May to go to the joint chief's office at the Pentagon. That's a place to get more exposure, more people get to know you. You hear a lot of politics in promotion in the army, but in general I never believed in that word "politics," it's just somebody's got to know you. You have so damn many records, when the board sits down, when you've got 4,000 records, to pick out 51 names...That's all that came out on the list in those days, you're bound to lean toward somebody you know. I wouldn't call that politics; it's just human nature because all the records are good. Otherwise they wouldn't be up there for them to look at them. They said there I would get more exposure. I said fine and went back home. I got a call to come back the next day that if I wasn't happy with that, I could get anything I wanted because they owed me something. I never asked them what that was. I had my suspicions, but I don't want to talk about that because the previous year I had heard I was on the general's list and all of a sudden seven names disappeared. I can't verify that. They said, 'there is a job coming open in May and you're the only person in the U.S. army that fits it. We need a colonel in Greece that speaks Greek that's artillery. There is no other one in the army. If you're interested in that, we'll hold that job for you, but if you do take it, that will take you out of the running for promotion because it's not considered a high level job.' So I said, "Yeah I'll take it." I didn't want to go back to the Pentagon because there was no guarantee that I'd make the promotion anyway and I was tired of the rat race. May came around, I got my orders in April to go to Greece in May. That's how I ended up in Greece.

Q: You were in Greece from when to when?

ATHANASON: That was summer of 1972 until summer of 1977 which was unusual because it's a two and a half year assignment. I stayed five years because at the end of my two and a half years, this chief of the army section, a MAG, we were home packing to come back to the States and the Cyprus situation happened.

Q: This was July of 1974.

ATHANASON: 1974. There was another colonel position at the Greek headquarters who was the liaison officer from NATO. That position was changing at the same time. The incumbent had already left and they were waiting for the replacement to come in. The Greeks refused to let him come in the country because Greece pulled out of NATO temporarily. That left that office open which got NATO very upset. I was contacted to see if I would be willing to go over and sit in that office since I was leaving any way, until they could straighten the matter out. I went over there and stayed in that job for two and a half years.

Q: Let's talk about the first two and a half years. What was your job?

ATHANASON: Mainly we were advising the, first of all, our mission over there was to get equipment for the Greek armed forces. We were giving them surplus equipment on the grant aid program which they didn't pay for. It was usually used, outdated equipment that the United States didn't want anymore like destroyers, tanks, artillery pieces. When the junta came to us, especially the chief of the air force in the junta, they said, "From now on we don't want hand me downs. We want modern equipment and we're going to pay for it." So then we went from grant aid to military sales. The United States government assisted them by guaranteeing the debt.

They started ordering new equipment, which takes a long time to start coming in. That was our main job: to help them order the equipment, what equipment to order, send their people to the States to get trained like the F-15, in those days, the A-7s. We would send people to all U.S. schools. I would go out and visit military units and try to talk with the high command about what I saw and how they could improve them. I tried to get a better curriculum in their military academy, more academic than military. I tried to introduce some women into the military because they didn't have any. I tried to get them to give civilians some more authority that worked for the military like GS 12. That was foreign to them. They had civilians who had been working for them for years and he had absolutely no authority and no recognition. Those were the kinds of things that we had to do.

Q: What was your impression of the Greek military at the time?

ATHANASON: The first two and a half years, I dealt with the army mostly. Of course, my counterparts in the air force and navy, we would talk among ourselves... The army was about 250,000 strong. I would go visit the units. Some of them were first class with the best equipment they could get. Some of them were very mediocre because they didn't have the equipment for them. They had them in a less dangerous spot like way over on the west coast against the Albanians for example, or sitting on the Island of Crete versus sitting up on the Yugoslav border or the Bulgarian frontier or the Turkish frontier. They had their strongest forces on the Turkish border.

I don't know, they had old equipment, they took care of it. The discipline was good. They were still in the early stages of trying to take care of their soldiers. They didn't believe in nice barracks or hot water or any amenities. They paid them like three dollars a month per soldier. They did take care of their equipment real well. I think that with what they were expected to do they would have fought a good war. They were used to the terrain; they were living on the past glories with what they did against the Italians and with what the ancient Greeks did. They were sort of overblown with their own importance. The air force, whenever they came to the American schools, they did very well. The navy, always had a tradition of working with the British and with the Americans. All in all, I would say that they were better than the Turkish forces, but so much smaller there was no match there.

Q: So this was a branch of NATO, but in reality it was sitting there waiting for the Turks to do something?

ATHANASON: The NATO countries earmarked certain units to NATO and kept certain units under their national control. When I was there, the Greeks had all of their units committed to NATO where the Turks did not. The Turks kept a whole army unit free from NATO poised to try to cross from Cyprus, waiting for somebody to make a mistake. Being that unit was not committed to NATO, it had the worst equipment, shortages, but it was there. It was there. Being able to speak the language, during the junta days, the officers were very, very open to discussing anything, politics or anything. After the junta fell, they tightened up. They wouldn't talk to you much. They had more freedom under the junta because they were all talking about the possibility of Turkey being an adversary. So, they kept an armored division poised on that right flank. They talked about Turkey. The Greek generals talked about Turkey the way I remembered the older generation of Greeks talking about Turkey when I was a kid. There was a deep rooted hatred from way back. I had a lot of experience working with Turks and I never heard that from them. They were ready to fight with them or against them.

Q: Were you giving them instructions or were you keeping an eye on the Greeks or directing their attention to Bulgaria?

ATHANASON: There was no question that they were doing a NATO mission. There was the headquarters in Salonika, it was the NATO headquarters. It acted as a field command post in case of war. There was another headquarters in Izmir, Turkey commanded by a four star U.S. general. He would take the Greek and Turkish forces under his command in case of war. They had Greeks and Turks on all those staffs and they had Turks and Greeks on the staffs in Naples. They all worked as a team. I don't know that they went out for a souvlaki together at night, but...

Q: I've talked to people who served in various places in Naples and they said that the Turks and Greeks officers always made sure they were sitting in the same place and wanted listening to the same things. That they seemed more concerned about what the other guy was doing... Where were you when Cyprus happened in 1974?

ATHANASON: I was still at the MAG in the process of packing. It was June. It was graduation day at the Greek naval academy. We went to that graduation. The cadets were all on the field, lined up and we were in the reviewing stand waiting and the time for the parade arrived and there was nothing happening. They were obviously waiting for someone. Fifteen or twenty minutes later this entourage arrived with motorcycles and sedans and there was General Gizikis who was then the President of Greece. I had met him earlier when he was a corps commander up at the Salonika. He came to the ceremony and they continued past the reviewing stand with his car and went to the far end of the parade field. He summoned the chiefs of the army, navy, and air force to come down and they had a pow wow. While they were down there talking, someone came and said, "Your office wants you on the phone. Come upstairs." I went there. They said, "Something happened in Cyprus. You've got to come back to the office."

So that's when we first heard about it. I talked to those three chiefs later and I said, "What did you guys go down there and talk about?" They said that General Gizikis told us there was a coup in Cyprus. The chief of the navy said that it caught [him] by complete surprise. The chief of the air force said that it was the first he'd ever heard of it. The army told me the same thing. Not the three together, they were separate conversations. All three denied that they knew anything about the coup in Cyprus until that very moment. I found out later that the army guy was lying, he knew about it. But, the other two still stuck with their stories. So, then there was a lot of excitement.

Since there was no representative of NATO, he'd already left the country, (they hadn't even talked about me holding down his seat yet), but I was asked to come over to the embassy. We were all standing out talking about what was going to happen and the ambassador was talking on the phone to Kissinger. You could hear him almost all the way down the hall, talking loudly. Then they called me in and said, "Get on the phone. You know those guys over there. Get on the phone and get the General Bonanos, who was head of the armed forces, (similar to our joint chiefs), to agree to declare Athens an open city. If the Turks will declare Izmir an open city...." Izmir was the only one they could have done any damage to. They had Ambassador Sisco flying back and forth. He needed time to negotiate. So, I told them I didn't think I was competent to do that over the telephone. I wasn't that well versed with the technical Greek language to talk about something as delicate as that. So he said, "Just go on over there and talk to him." So I went over and I sat in this general's office for several hours. My mission was to keep him from giving the go ahead to strike back. It was touch-and-go there.

Q: Did you get anywhere on the open cities?

ATHANASON: No. They wouldn't agree to that. He'd say, "What would you do?" I couldn't give him any advice. The only thing the Greeks could have done to bloody the Turks' nose right there would have been a surprise strike on Izmir. And then hope to hell we stopped the retaliation. But, they couldn't strike in Cyprus; they didn't have the means to go all the way there. I did find out later that the Greek navy chief ordered U.S. Ford diesel submarines to head for Cyprus and they were turned back half way there. They were very close to doing something, at least that was the impression of the Greek armed forces. The Greek officer corps I dealt with, even when I was a colonel they treated me as more than a colonel because I was the only guy they had to talk to. I got to know a lot of the Greek generals. There were two kinds of Greeks generals: the ones who had trained in the United States and most of them spoke English of course. Then, you had the ones that didn't speak English at all and there was a certain animosity between those two groups. Unfortunately, the chief of the armed forces was one in the group that didn't speak English at all. He was a real villager. He was a hard-headed type. When he gave me a response, when I tried to tell him the consequences of starting any action, what the Turks could do... He answered me by saying that I didn't really understand the Greeks. He said that they were 'willing to burn their house down to get rid of the bed bugs,' meaning that he didn't care what happened. He was ready to go.

Q: Did you get any feel Papadopoulos junta had been overthrown in November, 1973, I believe, around Thanksgiving time.

ATHANASON: It was four or five months before. I don't know exactly.

Q: I remember because I was off in Olympus. Had that changed the colonels' (who had taken over in 1967) were thrown out and a group of generals came in, did that make much of a difference?

ATHANASON: What generals took over? Ioannidis took over, but he kept most of the people in place. Papadopoulos was the only one who lost favor, but the rest sort of stayed in place.

Q: So there wasn't a real change.

ATHANASON: No.

Q: Was there concern about Ioannidis? He was sort of a mystery man.

ATHANASON: Frankly, Stu, I really don't believe our embassy or the CIA really knew what the hell was going on.

Q: I can't contradict you.

ATHANASON: I don't think they really knew what was going on.

Q: My impression was the CIA had been co-opted by the Greek Intelligence Service.

ATHANASON: There was a tendency in the embassy to kick names around as if you knew somebody and you were on the in with the Greeks. And, the same must have happened with the CIA. But, I had talked to a CIA official after this happened and we knew that there was some problem with Cyprus before it happened and it involved the bishop, Makarios getting upset with the Greeks having too much to do with controlling his national guard. The junta, mainly Ioannidis was upset with him for even questioning it.

They had him come to Athens to talk and just about that time, where the CIA really should have found out what the hell was going on, they really didn't find out. But, apparently they must have given him an ultimatum to knock it off. He wanted Greek (there was an agreement that there was only a certain amount of Greek forces that were supposed to have been in Cyprus, a battalion size), but they had infiltrated other people in there. I guess that's why Makarios wanted them out. They had too much influence. They gave him an ultimatum and I guess he didn't buy it. That's why a couple of weeks later the coup occurred. This CIA man said that they had wind that there were some problems. Someone was sent to talk to Ioannidis saying that the last thing we wanted was turmoil in that part of the Mediterranean because we had Watergate going on.

We heard that this problem was developing and we warned them to cool it down and he answered, "Do you think I'm crazy? Of course, I'm not going to cause any trouble." So, they seemed to have been satisfied that it was diffused. They caught them by surprise when it happened. The chief of the navy spoke English well, he was a graduate of the war college in Rhode Island and even though I was army, I was a very good friend of his. I had gone to his house and he had come to my house. I had gone to his cottage out in the mountains. We had more of a friendly relationship than I had with the army people really. The army people were more crude.

He told me three years ago when I saw him (I hadn't seen him since I left Greece) that he smelled something happening, going on. He called Ioannidis in to his office and of course this guy was a three star admiral and Ioannidis was a brigadier general. He said Ioannidis came in with proper military courtesy and saluted and stood at attention. The admiral told him, "I hear some rumbling going on. We don't want any trouble. Tell me what's going on." He said at that point Ioannidis told him to go to hell, slammed stuff off his desk, threatened him, and turned around and walked out. He said it shocked him, he thought, 'he comes in here with proper demeanor and finally he goes out.' He also said, "by the way, you know, he was the man behind Papadopoulos from the beginning." That was the first time I'd ever heard that. His position was that Ioannidis was always the leader, but he never came out front until he got rid of Papadopoulos.

Q: He was military police, right?

ATHANASON: Yes.

Q: I tried to see him a couple of times about draft questions and I never could get in to see him.

ATHANASON: I had never heard that he was the chief from the beginning. I knew that he took over, but it's plausible.

Q: What happened? What were you observing when the Turks landed and things started to go bad for the Greeks?

ATHANASON: There was nothing we could do about it because I think President Ford was only in office like four days. When the new ambassador came over later, he said that (he got us all together and talked to us) the United States came closest to having a military coup than at any part of our history. I don't know what he meant by that, maybe figuratively speaking. Washington was pretty much paralyzed; they weren't going to take any action. Our action was for Sisco to go back and forth to try to prevent a war from starting. And the Turks, I think, may be thought they had accomplished their mission by landing in Kyrenia and probably were willing to stop there. I'm just guessing, speculating.

If things were going well in negotiations, but then there was a dead time where the colonels disappeared, there was no government in Greece, there was a vacuum there. Sisco couldn't talk to any body. The ambassador didn't have anybody to talk to. And finally this chief of navy stood up and said, "I'll be Greece, you speak with me." He became the government of Greece because he was the only guy with the balls to speak up.

Then they brought back Adamyalee, they brought Bavrous out of the moth balls and they sent him to Geneva. The Greeks started dinking around and the Turks were getting impatient. They didn't see they were making any progress and that's when they moved out and took the other thirty-five percent of the land. Some quick diplomacy at that point... maybe they would have stopped at Kyrenia. I don't know. I think they were just trying to make a point.

Q: Basically, Ioannidis and company lost complete support of the people.

ATHANASON: I joke with people and say that at that time Greece had a twenty million population, ten million that supported Ioannidis until he screwed up and then there were ten million against him the next day. If he would have succeeded, I think if Makarios could have been killed and they weren't stupid to put this guy Samson there and they would have put in a decent government right away, I think that Greece could have had embassies with Cyprus. If there had been some way to keep the Turks off their backs and Ioannidis would have been a hero. But, he failed. He became the villain. Greeks always want to be able to blame somebody else. And he took all the blame.

Q: The next two and a half years, how different were the armed forces?

ATHANASON: Because of the promotion system of Greeks, especially in the general officer ranks, you can never serve over somebody that you used to rank. So, the new government got busy promoting people down the line and cleansing the junta oriented people out of their armed services. If they went down the major general's list to promote somebody to three star and got to number eleven and promoted him, the other ten had to retire the next day. So that way you cleanse your political opponents. There was a period there where they brought people back from retirement. The head of the armed forces then became a guy that had been retired by the junta. Those that had been kicked out became popular again and were brought back. The ones that had tried to pull a coup in the navy were brought back. So there was this turmoil of changing the hierarchy of the armed forces. I don't know if that affected the troops any. At the top level, big shifts were made.

Q: Did you feel any change in the attitude towards us and towards Turkey?

ATHANASON: Well there was no big change against Turkey; they hated them to begin with. There was no big change there. This new group that came in was not gung ho, ready to go, and burn the tent to get rid of the bed bugs, they were a little bit more somber, but they got cool toward us. We were blamed for the junta, we were blamed for the Cyprus situation, and we were blamed for not stopping it. Like I said, none of the army officers I'd go visit were willing to have a political discussion with you. They were very careful. The attaches of all countries, it became more and more difficult for them to visit different areas of Greece. They became tighter. My counterpart that went to MAG, he couldn't visit the way I used to visit. There was a tightening up. Our embassy had all their eggs in one basket, Karamanlis. They thought that no one else could do the job but him. So they had to one 100 percent back him, behind him. These are my own opinions. I could be flat wrong. But, they wanted to be very politically correct. They didn't want any more criticism. Anything that happened, they would just swallow it. They allowed Karamanlis to use that opportunity to let anti-Americanism spread for his own benefit. As I said, the example I always use with Greeks is if Karamanlis was brought back from France and he had to swim across a river to get to Athens and the river was full of sharks then the Greeks threw a piece of meat down at the far end of the river for all the sharks to go down there, and he swam across. That piece of meat was the United States. Some Greeks agree with that, some get in an argument with me.

Q: There were lots of demonstrations against our embassy during this period.

ATHANASON: But see that's easy to stir up in any country, especially in the youth, in the universities. Just like here in the United States during the Vietnam War. Anti-Americanism spread. It may have been there before, but during the junta they didn't dare express it. The junta treated us very, very well and very carefully because they needed us. This certainly kept us in high esteem even though we weren't very nice to them. We were cool.

Q: How about was the November 17th movement a problem when you were there?

ATHANASON: No they had the polytechnic uprising, that's where they took the name. They weren't in existence yet. I was well aware of the polytechnic problem where the students barred themselves into the university. Anarchy sort of prevailed. The Greek police lost complete control. They asked for the army to help them. I did talk with the chief of the army at the time (I was still in MAG at that time). I knew him very well. He agonized over sending these troops down there, he didn't want to. But, they had no choice. The troops went down there and according to the best I could find out; the tanks got down there and smashed the front gate down. Most of the students ran out the back end and they took control of the university. The left wing spin machine called it a massacre and I understand every year they have a celebration about the massacre of the students. I don't know if anybody could come up with any names of anybody that was killed during that so-called massacre. But, the Greeks like these myths about conspiracies. You'll hear it from educated Greeks and down the street think that thousands of kids were killed there, or hundreds. It depends on who's talking to you how many numbers.

Q: When you left there, you retired?

ATHANASON: Yes, I came back. I would have had one more assignment to go to, but since I stayed for the second one there, I only had about three or four months to do in the army. So, I came back and ended up in the Hoffman building reviewing efficiency reports.

Q: That sounds like fun.

ATHANASON: Yes, where they put the old elephants that die.

Q: This is a good place to stop. I want to thank you very much. It was most interesting. It gives us a little different insight into some of the developments during the period you were talking about including your time as a prisoner in East Germany.

ATHANASON: It was interesting to know people like that chief of the navy. Like I was saying, three years ago, Vickie and I were there and we happened to run into him. He rehashed it all over again. That's where the 17 November group started, based on that. I was told that I was on their list too and that I left at the right time.

Q: They killed the station chief and military attachï¿½.

ATHANASON: They did catch a group of young men. Some of them were active duty military. They had burned about twenty-five American cars. I had had two cars of mine burned there (not personal cars, sedans). They had a trial (this was after the junta had fallen). One of the cars they burned, a personal car, was my secretary's at MAG. She was told that she should go there for the trial. She asked me if she should go and I said, "Yes." I went to the embassy and asked who from the embassy was going (she was afraid to go by herself). They told me no one. I said, "No one from the embassy is going to this trial. Don't you understand, this is a political trial? We should know what the hell is going on." They showed no interest. This is what used to get me upset with the embassy. I said, 'they don't know what the hell is going on. They don't want to ruffle anybody's feathers.' So, I went to the trial with her. Right at the beginning of the trial, it became very obvious that there were a lot of leftists in the room. They took control of the trial. The judge couldn't bring order. They ran the judge out of the room. They were spitting on the witnesses, hollering. It was pandemonium. I was afraid we were going to have a problem. That's probably why the embassy didn't want to go. It became so obvious then that we were in for some rough future problems in Greece.

Q: We'll stop at this point. Thank you very much.

End of interview